DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 395 287 CS 012 453

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TITLE Self-Directed Learning: Revisiting an Idea Most Appropriate for Middle School Students.
PUB DATE Nov 95
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Combined Meeting of the Great Lakes and Southeast International Reading Association (1st, Nashville, TN, November 11-15, 1995).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Discussion (Teaching Technique); *Independent Study; *Individualized Instruction; Intermediate Grades; Junior High Schools; *Middle Schools; Self Motivation; *Student Characteristics; *Student Role; Teacher Role
IDENTIFIERS *Middle School Students; *Self Direction

ABSTRACT

To provide opportunities for self-direction, middle-school educators must offer an orchestrated development plan aimed at the acquisition of attitudes and skills that allow and promote self-direction. Self-direction and self-help are becoming increasingly necessary as "high-tec" cultures move forward. Self-directed learners exhibit initiative, independence, and persistence in learning; accept responsibility for their own learning; are capable of self-discipline and have a high degree of curiosity; possess a strong desire to learn and to change; are self-confident; are able to use basic study skills and organize their time; and enjoy learning and have a tendency to be goal oriented. Movement toward an increase in self-directed learning is a viable task. Directed discourse/discussion is an effective tool for the implementation of an effort to make students aware of the options, goals, and objectives of self-directed learning. Students need opportunities to act on decisions driven by their attitudes toward expanding and changing their role as a learner in the schooling environment. A move toward the development of self-direction in learning may well set in motion the evolution of the self-directed teacher. (Contains eight references.) (RS)

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SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING: REVISITING AN IDEA MOST APPROPRIATE FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS

Dr. Bob Taylor

The soon to arrive 21st century is already calling for its participants to be better educated which translates into a call for educators to prepare learners who are better able to think, to function, to problem-solve, and to self-assess. Middle school learners are ready, are able, and respond positively to opportunities for self-direction (Taylor, 1984). To provide such opportunities, middle school educators must offer an orchestrated development plan aimed at the acquisition of attitudes and skills that allow and promote self-direction (Turning Points, 1989).

THE CALL: WHAT DO WE NEED TO DO?

Self-direction and self-help are becoming increasingly necessary as our "high-tec" cultures move forward. These new cultures will require the continuation of learning as a process of living rather than merely a preparation for living (Taylor, 1984). The middle school learner is physically and emotionally stepping into cultural changes that include: (1) the role of information in the hands of many, (2) a movement from centralization to decentralization, (3) a higher degree of self-help and choice in health and education, (4) representative democracy giving way to a more participatory democracy, and (5) a movement toward multiple options rather than "either-or" situations (Naisbitt, 1982).

Carl Rogers, an early respondent to the need for increased self-direction for younger learners elaborated, "If we are to have citizens who can live constructively in the kaleidoscopically changing world, we can only have them if we are willing for them to become self-starting, self-initiating learners." In a report to the nation by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, "A Nation at Risk," commission members concluded that to achieve excellence the learner must take hold of life, apply gifts and talents, and work through self-direction and self-discipline. The call is clear. The middle school learner is ripe for the experience and ready to participate as "a person en route to

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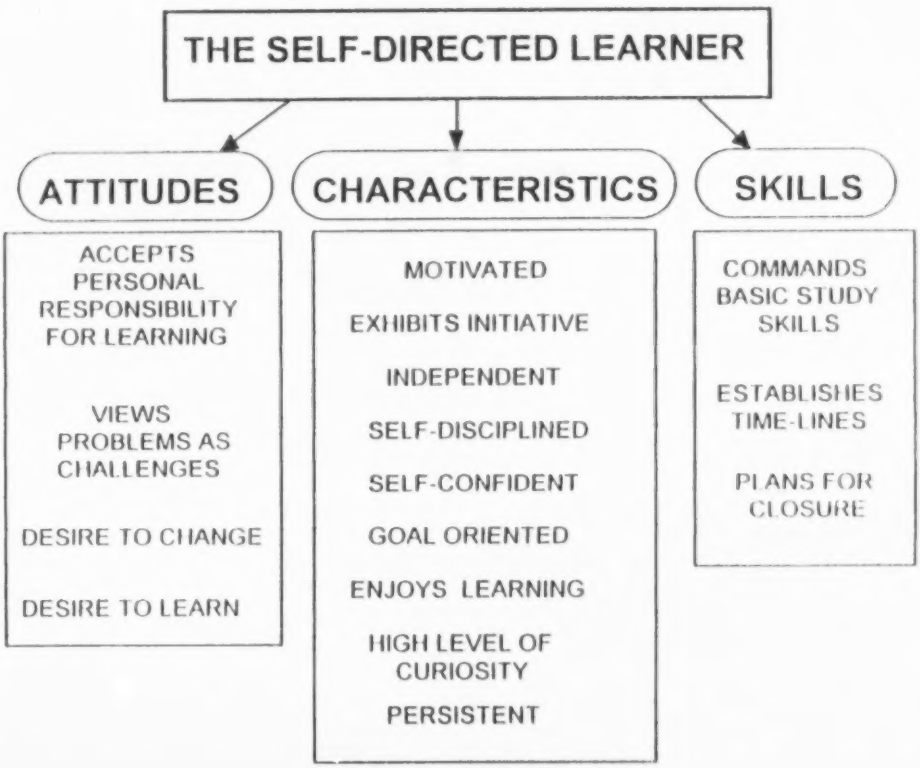
a lifetime of meaningful work" (Turning Points, 1989). The need is evident. The goal of producing increasingly self-directed learners is defensible and appropriate, particularly when we consider that our students will live in a world of their own design doing what they want to do, the way they want to do it, making short-term and long-term choices which will affect their behaviors, success, and happiness.

WHO ARE THE "SELF-DIRECTED?"

Educators are quick to recognize self-directed learners. These learners set themselves apart from those who simply "absorb and consume" information and content. Self-directed learners "produce" as a result of interacting in the learning environment. A comprehensive definition of a self-directed learner would note that they are those who exhibit initiative, independence, and persistence in learning; they accept responsibility for their own learning viewing problems as challenges, not obstacles; they are capable of self-discipline and have a high degree of curiosity; they possess a strong desire to learn and to change; they are self-confident; they are able to use basic study skills and organize their time; they enjoy learning and have a tendency to be goal oriented (Guglielmino, 1977).



THE PROBLEM: WHAT'S WRONG?

Current instructional practices that involve continued lecture, drill, text driven instruction and testing for basic recall undermine the goals of preparing learners to be self-directed (Taylor, 1984). This, coupled with weak pedagogical practices and an absence of concrete strategies for enhancing self-direction has led to the misuse of self-direction which is often considered as small piece or "idea within learning" rather than as a "concept of learning" itself (Goodlad, 1984). If we are to address the call to produce increasingly self-directed learners we must better understand the learner, related skills, characteristics, and attitudes required for the development of self-directed learning behaviors.

THE TASK: WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE?

Movement toward an increase in self-directed learning is a viable task. Treffinger (1982) suggested that such movement is possible if learner options, goals, and objectives are clear. The learner must be allowed to assume a role with responsibilities of a self-directed learner. The most direct and obvious entry route to this task would be to offer discourse and discussion aimed at the elevation of student awareness of options, goals and objectives as they relate to the learner and increased self-direction. The logical follow-up would result in students being provided with an environment that would offer a risk-free forum for sharing, a situation that maximizes the use of positive peer pressure, allows for a variety of insights into the understanding of one's attitudes and behaviors, and accommodates a change in behavioral and attitudinal patterns of members (Johnson and Johnson, 1982).

THE METHODOLOGY: HOW DO YOU DO IT?

Directed discourse/discussion is a most effective tool for the implementation of an awareness effort. Such discussions must take place over an extended period of time and on a regular basis allowing time for reflection, decision, and action (Taylor, 1984).

Through discussions, students would have repeated opportunities to grapple with the numerous options that exist in their learning environment. Students would be focused to a point of awareness resulting in decisions that would allow them to become active participants in the development of their role as a learner.

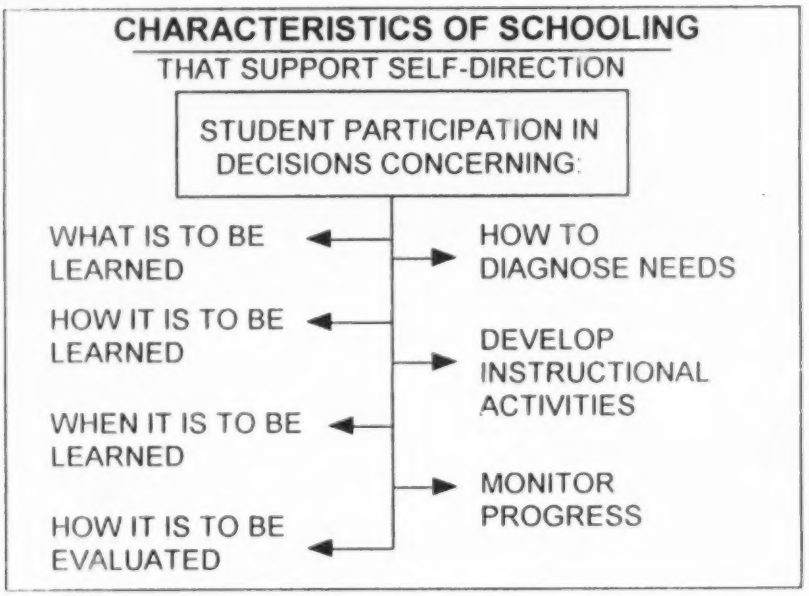
Discussions can be directed to revolve around specific topics developed to enhance awareness of roles in learning and to enhance self-directed learning behaviors. These topics are easily extracted from the Self-directed Learning Readiness Scale (Guglielmino, 1977). This approach and content was employed in a research context (Taylor, 1984) resulting in highly increased SDLRS scores suggesting that student awareness had been positively influenced.

Topics for discussions include: (1) I know when learning begins, ends and how long it will continue, (2) I know that I want to learn and that I am a learner so if I want to learn something, I can, (3) I can make choices about what to learn, the materials and resources I need to learn, and how I want to learn, (4) I want to be like people that I know who are learners and can do things, (5) I like to learn and to solve problems because I know that thinking "hard" can be fun, and (6) I know that leaners are readers, reading can be fun, and learning can be fun. The teacher, as discussion leader, is faced with the challenge of getting students to openly and freely respond to the topic statements. The teacher may elect to assume the role of devil's advocate to challenge student thinking allowing opportunities for students to alter and defend their opinions, ideas, and stands. The discussion leader furthers the role by assisting students in understanding the meaning of statements as they relate to educational development, consequences of given choices, and resulting attitudes.

HOW IS THE SELF-DIRECTED LEARNER ACCOMMODATED?

Now for some practice! Students need opportunities to act on decisions driven by their attitudes toward expanding and changing their role as a learner in the schooling environment. Students need to build upon repeated successes after making decisions about what they learn, how they learn, when they learn, how they are evaluated, and

how they move forward with learning through additional study and research, enrichment and acceleration. The following chart notes that for the enhancement of self-directed learning, the teacher is removed from the decision-making role replaced by the student. This does not imply that the role of the teacher is gone and that direction and instructional leadership are not still required. It does imply that a collaborative relationship evolve which recognizes that learners are involved in the diagnosis of needs, the prescription of appropriate learning activities, and in the monitoring of progress.


CHARACTERISTICS OF SCHOOLING
THAT SUPPORT SELF-DIRECTION
STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN DECISIONS CONCERNING:
WHAT IS TO BE LEARNED
HOW IT IS TO BE LEARNED
WHEN IT IS TO BE LEARNED
HOW IT IS TO BE EVALUATED
HOW TO DIAGNOSE NEEDS
DEVELOP INSTRUCTIONAL ACTIVITIES
MONITOR PROGRESS

THE CONSEQUENCES: WHAT IF WE DO THIS? WHAT IF WE DON'T?

An absence of a decision to strive toward self-directed learning is an acceptance of the status quo finding students as victims of a system which is superimposed upon them. A system in which they have no part, no ownership, and no value or concern. It is inconceivable that we would elect to ignore the call to address the need for increasingly self-directed learners in response to the needs of the future(s) of a new world. Surely, we collectively agree with Carl Rogers (1969) that, "Our students must be

able to live constructively in this kaleidoscopically changing world and to do so they must be self-starting, self-initiating, self-directed learners."

If we elect to address self-direction we must be cognizant of the "danger" of producing increasingly self-directed learners; those who will insist that they have a role in their learning. These new-age, high-tec-culture learners could soon evolve to a point where they could not/would not operate under the old system creating new challenges for educators who would be charged with altering and updating their roles as facilitators, guides, and collaborative partners in the learning environment and process. It would seem that with a move toward the development of self-direction in learning and the enhancement of self-directed learners that we may well set into motion the evolution of the self-directed teacher. One can only speculate that the consequences of such could be the new age of education, the ultimate goal of the learner, and the emancipation of the teacher, perhaps the answer.

Shall we begin?

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